



Chosen People called to proclaim: Life and Hope for Women in Palestine



Methodist and Presbyterian Women's Special Project 2019—20 with the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees and Christian World Service

Before the war in her home country Syria began in 2011, Fatima (not her real name) could never have imagined she would learn to read. There was always plenty to do looking after her children, husband and the home. Life has changed but not all of it is bad.

Her biggest achievement has been to learn to read. She has had this opportunity thanks to DSPR Lebanon and other women who are part of their training programme. Over decades of supporting Palestinian refugees, DSPR has developed an approach that works. They train trainers and tutors to work with other refugees and offer the comfort and community that they may not have. Everyone gains self-confidence.

In a Nutshell:

The Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees is organised through five regional committees in Galilee, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and the West Bank (including Jerusalem). They work so Palestinian refugees and displaced people:

- can live healthy lives
- improve family livelihoods and income
- can access emergency assistance
- can advocate for their own needs and human rights





Palestinian Christians

Ten years ago Palestinian Christians agreed to an important document that encapsulated much of their hopes and dreams. In Kairos Palestine as it is called, they advocate for an end to the Israeli Occupation and call for international support to achieve a just solution to the conflict.

Who is a Palestinian Refugee?

According to the United Nations, a Palestine refugee is any person whose "normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict." The descendants of these people also meet the criteria, making a total of 5.5 million people. Jordan is host to the largest population of Palestinians refugees.

An estimated 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes during the Palestinian war in 1948—a day known as the Nakba or 'day of catastrophe'. They have been unable to return —families have keys to their homes and in recent years some have been to visit their old homes. The Nakba is marked on May 15, the day in 1948 the British ended their mandate in Palestine. The Right of Return is therefore a key and usually non-negotiable platform for Palestinians, including Christians.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency was established in 1949 to provide relief, human development and protection services to Palestinian refugees. UNRWA works in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, running schools, medical clinics and other services for Palestinians in and around 58 camps across the region.

"We, a group of Christian Palestinians, after prayer, reflection and an exchange of opinion, cry out from within the suffering in our country, under the Israeli occupation, with a cry of hope in the absence of all hope, a cry full of prayer and faith in a God ever vigilant, in God's divine providence for all the inhabitants of this land. Inspired by the mystery of God's love for all, the mystery of God's divine presence in the history of all peoples and, in a particular way, in the history of our country, we proclaim our word based on our Christian faith and our sense of Palestinian belonging – a word of faith, hope and love."

You can find the document and more information about their aspirations: <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/>





DSPR provides significant psycho-social care to refugees scarred by poverty and trauma.

A Better Future for Women

According to the World Bank, Palestinian unemployment [was](#) 31 per cent in 2018 with 52% of Gaza's workforce unemployed. Continuing conflict and the occupation contribute to their difficulties. Gaza's water and electricity are controlled by Israel which also severely limits the importation of building materials. Frequent military attacks and severe poverty contribute to the high degree of trauma. In Gaza, DSPR's three primary health care clinics are expanding to meet the growing need for psychosocial care. The military presence is very strong in Galilee and the West Bank. Checkpoints are common and Israeli settlements overlooking Palestinian lands are becoming more threatening.

Vocational programmes for young women and educational work to prevent early marriages of young girls are some of the strategies DSPR uses to address these concerns. Graduates from the secretarial course (*pictured below*) find jobs.



Good Old Times

To cope with growing populations, the people have squeezed in more buildings to the small area allocated to them. Conditions are cramped, dangerous and often unhealthy. In Lebanon DSPR works in three camps—though they are more like very poor suburbs. In southern Beirut, Sabra is widely condemned as unhygienic and dangerous but the refugees have nowhere else to go. DSPR runs all age education programmes in the camps. They run a preschool, adult education classes, extra tutorial classes for school students and classes for children who have dropped out of school. Refugee teachers run the programmes, mostly as volunteers.

One of the highlights is the summer programme which offers welcome respite for the children. This year at the Dbayeh camp in north eastern Beirut, DSPR ran a six week summer camp for 4-13 year olds on the site of a derelict UNRWA school. Home to about 4,000 Palestinian and Syrian refugees as well as to poor Lebanese families, DSPR built a programme around their common traditions. At the "Good Old Times" camp, they learnt songs, dances and prepared traditional foods, drawing as well as art activities and clown shows. Parents and grandparents spoke to the children about their early life and shared traditional stories.

Young people like 17 year old Oliver volunteered at the camp. He said the theme intrigued him. "I'm spending more time currently with my grandmother listening to her stories as she tells me about her childhood." He concluded that, "Old people enjoyed real colourful life although their television was in black and white".



Hope for the Children

Life is not easy for the children. For Palestinians born in the camps, it is their home but not their homeland. They have limited access to healthcare and education. In the West Bank and Gaza, they have witnessed military attacks, violence and trauma. Their lives are constrained by the occupation. Syrian refugees have similar experiences. DSPR runs psychosocial support groups for children and women as part of its primary healthcare programmes. Extra help is available for the most severely affected.

The school, tutorial programmes and summer camps contribute to their health and wellbeing. Of special note, are the programmes for school dropouts who may be depressed, having learning or other difficulties. They are a lifeline, saving children from the streets and child marriage. Through their highly sought after vocational training programmes they earn qualifications and get jobs. With more support they could extend these programmes, giving children the chance to learn and have fun.



Message from DSPR

Although you all are at the furthest distance from the Holy Land, yet your caring, prayers and overall support have always been with us in the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches. In particular the generosity and solidarity you have shown to Palestinian women and young people gets reflected in activities of immediate relief, psychosocial support, planning for economic self-support with a small business, networking among the women here in order that they cope better with the different and difficult challenges facing them, their youngsters and their community. This all would not have been possible without your support and each one of the Methodist and Presbyterian women in New Zealand intent on making a difference in our world.

We feel that difference and I am sure I speak on behalf of our women and young people when I send you a BIG THANK YOU each and every one of you. May you be blessed."

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